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Beyond Guidance: Mentorship as a Capacity Building Framework for Global Researcher Development in Chinese Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

As China consolidates its status as a global research powerhouse, the scholarly focus has shifted from research output to research capacity. Chinese universities have seen a rapid growth in publications and international collaborations. However, mentorship in Chinese Universities remains largely informal, hierarchical, and output-driven, neglecting the holistic development of researchers capable of competing globally. This article contributes a key conceptual bridge by merging the theory of mentorship with capacity-building literature and frameworks of global competence in the higher education context of China. It puts forth the argument that mentorship should be perceived not only as academic assistance but also as a mechanism for strategic capacity building. Methodologically, this study employs an integrative conceptual analysis that synthesizes mentorship theory, capacity building scholarship, and global competence literature to develop a context-sensitive framework for researcher development in Chinese higher education. The paper introduces the Mentorship–Capacity–Global (MCG) Framework, a dynamic and context-sensitive model for developing global researchers that draws on developmental, relational, and transformative models of mentorship. The framework acknowledges the mentorship architectures, multidimensional capacities, and world outcomes while factoring in China's cultural and institutional conditions. This paper contributes to theory through the internationalization of the mentorship discourse and its non-Western application, as well as institutional policy, mentor training, and evaluation systems, which go beyond publication outputs, to sustainable researcher development.

INTRODUCTION

China's rise as a global leader in research production has been very rapid (Pisani *et al.*, 2025). According to (Guo *et al.*, 2023), Chinese universities have seen a significant surge in international ranking owing to massive national projects and significant investment in higher education. Although more research is being produced than ever, concerns abound as to the quality of production in terms of innovation, cross-cultural collaboration, and researcher mobility (Jiang *et al.*, 2025; Shen, 2024).

The issue of researcher development is facing front and Centre of this paradox. Many Chinese universities still keep the mentorship model within the supervision model, paying more attention to the output than the process (Bloomberg, 2025). Due to the lack of formal training structures for graduate students in postgraduate education, especially in their academic writing and presentation (Pantic & Hamilton, 2024).

The key argument of this paper is that mentorship is not an auxiliary necessarily but rather a capacity-building intervention. It answers the following conceptual questions.

1. What can mentorship cultivate about global researcher capacity?
2. In which way do Chinese institutional and cultural contexts shape mentorship–capacity dynamics?
3. What elements should the theory of change be composed of?

In response, the paper proposes a conceptual framework that is grounded in relevant mentorship literature. It includes a capacity-building component to promote global competencies within the higher education context in China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentorship and Researcher Development in Higher Education

Mentorship has long been acknowledged as an important mechanism through which individuals acquire professional knowledge, skills, social networks, and occupational identities. In higher education, mentoring relationships are mainly significant because doctoral students and early-career researchers enter academic environments in which much of the knowledge required for successful research careers is silent, relational, and context-dependent. Foundational mentorship scholarship dichotomizes between career-related functions, involving sponsorship, coaching, exposure, protection, and psychosocial functions, like role modeling, counselling, acceptance, and also friendship (John *et al.*, 2022; Sharma Yadav & Yadav, n.d., 2023). This difference established an important basis for understanding mentorship as a developmental process that extends beyond the mere transmission of technical knowledge. In researcher development, mentorship can apparently influence not only what emerging researchers know, but also how

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they understand academic work, construct professional identities, develop confidence, and gain access to research communities.

Mentorship in Chinese Higher Education

Chinese higher education offers a significant context for examining the relationship between mentorship and researcher development. The expansion of China's research capacity over the years has been accompanied by growing expectations for universities, doctoral students, supervisors, and early-career researchers to contribute to international research networks and global knowledge production. At the same time, Chinese universities have pursued research excellence, internationalization, talent development, and enhanced global visibility ((Almlöv *et al.*, 2026; Bentil & Nsiah, 2025; Dorsah, n.d., 2026). These developments have heightened the importance of mentorship as a means of preparing researchers to navigate both domestic academic institutions and increasingly internationalized research environments.

In this context, the daoshi system represents a central institutional mechanism for postgraduate supervision and academic socialization. The supervisor-student relationship can circumscribe research guidance, disciplinary training, professional socialization, career development, and, in some circumstances, broader forms of personal and academic support (Mireku *et al.*, 2026; Sutter & Francis, 2022). The system can, as a result, provide important advantages by establishing clear responsibility, facilitating access to disciplinary expertise, and supporting scholarly apprenticeship. At the same time, its hierarchical character may create tensions regarding student autonomy, critical voice, communication, and psychological safety, especially where authority is closely associated with academic evaluation and career progression (Fullwood, 2023; Marie *et al.*, 2023). Significantly, hierarchy should not be treated as fundamentally dysfunctional. The conceptual issue emerges when hierarchical authority becomes the dominant organizing principle of mentorship and when research success is defined primarily through immediate productivity indicators. Under such conditions, researchers may become proficient in completing assigned research tasks without necessarily developing the independence, adaptability, networking capabilities, intercultural competence, and epistemic flexibility required for sustained participation in global research communities.

This tension proposes the need to move from an exclusively pair conception of mentorship toward a more diversified developmental architecture. This study does not advocate abandoning the daoshi system or eliminating academic authority; rather, it proposes that hierarchical supervision can be complemented by peer, network, and also reciprocal mentoring relationships. Such diversification can retain the strengths of structured academic supervision while creating additional spaces for experimentation, reflection, constructive feedback,

intellectual risk-taking, and international engagement. This position is consistent with broader scholarship suggesting that developmental networks can provide forms of support and expertise that cannot always be supplied by a single mentor (Agmada *et al.*, 2022; Higgins, 2022). The Chinese context therefore provides an important setting for extending mentorship theory from a primarily pair relationship toward a context-sensitive and networked model of researcher capacity development.

Capacity Building and Researcher Development

Capacity building provides a second conceptual foundation for understanding researcher development. Though the concept has been applied across development studies, organizational studies, public administration, education, and institutional reform, its central focus is the development of capabilities that enable individuals and organizations to perform effectively, adapt to changing conditions, and sustain improvement over time (Velasco & Villanueva, 2022). A capacity-building perspective is different from a narrow skills-training approach. Skills training generally focuses on acquiring specific competencies for immediate tasks; capacity building emphasizes enduring capabilities, agency, resources, relationships, and enabling conditions that allow individuals and institutions to continue learning and adapting (Cuéllar *et al.*, 2025; Oommen *et al.*, 2025). This distinction is especially important within contemporary research environments, where methodological approaches, digital technologies, publication practices, funding structures, and international research networks are continuously evolving.

Applied to higher education, researcher capacity consequently extends beyond methodological competence. A researcher can possess sophisticated technical knowledge while having limited confidence in international collaboration, insufficient familiarity with international funding systems, limited experience in interdisciplinary dialogue, and epistemological differences. Capacity building gives a broader analytical lens for understanding these interconnected dimensions of researcher development. On this premise, this paper conceptualizes researcher capacity across four mutually reinforcing dimensions: cognitive, social, affective, and material capacity. Cognitive capacity encompasses critical thinking, analytical reasoning, research design, and problem framing; social capacity concerns collaboration, networking, communication, negotiation, and conflict management; affective capacity involves resilience, confidence, professional identity, adaptability, and ethical sensitivity; while material capacity comprises practical research capabilities such as academic writing, grant development, data management, digital research skills, and familiarity with publication systems (Ho *et al.*, 2026; Plummer *et al.*, 2022; Schmidt *et al.*, 2022; Yurt, 2025).

These dimensions are not independent competencies that can be accumulated through short-term training. They instead develop through sustained interaction among

individuals, relationships, institutions, and research environments. Mentorship is especially relevant because it can at the same time support cognitive development through intellectual challenge, social development through network access, affective development through encouragement and identity formation, and material development through practical guidance and research participation. This gives an important conceptual bridge between mentorship and global researcher development. The central proposition emerging from the literature implies that mentorship becomes a capacity-building mechanism when it moves beyond the immediate transmission of knowledge and creates sustained opportunities for researchers to practice, reflect, receive feedback, develop agency, and participate in increasingly complex research environments.

Global Competence and the Development of Global Researchers

The internationalization of higher education has generated increasing scholarly attention to the competencies needed for individuals to operate effectively across cultural, disciplinary, institutional, and national boundaries. Contemporary scholarship generally conceptualizes global competence as multidimensional, incorporating knowledge, skills, attitudes, dispositions, and capacities for meaningful engagement within an interconnected world (Kraja *et al.*, 2024; Rumbley *et al.*, 2023). For researchers, global competence should not be reduced to international publication or overseas conference participation. It instead involves the ability to engage with various research traditions, communicate across cultural boundaries, collaborate within international teams, recognize diverse epistemological assumptions, and negotiate several institutional expectations (Anjum & Aziz, 2024; Li & Yang, 2026; Sajjapong & Irfan, 2022). Global researcher development consequently requires both international exposure and deeper capacity to interpret, connect, and work across various knowledge systems.

An important dimension of this competence is what the present study conceptualizes as epistemic mobility: the capacity to move across various knowledge systems, disciplinary traditions, and research cultures without automatically treating one epistemological position as universally superior. This capability is complemented by collaborative agility, especially as contemporary research increasingly includes multidisciplinary and multicultural teams. Researchers must negotiate differences in language, methodological assumptions, communication styles, academic conventions, and institutional priorities while maintaining productive relationships (Dhunpath, 2026; Ejjebli, 2024; Taraqul Islam & Chowdhury, 2026). Ethical reflexivity is quite important because transnational research may include various expectations regarding authorship, data ownership, intellectual property, participant protection, community engagement, and research integrity. Global researchers therefore need

the capacity to recognize and critically negotiate ethical differences rather than simply transferring assumptions from one research context to another (Ademolu, 2023; Holtbrügge, 2025).

Digital and data fluency further expand the meaning of global researcher competence. International research collaboration increasingly depends on digital communication platforms, shared data infrastructures, computational tools, open-science practices, and virtual research communities (Treloar & Woodford, 2024; Wider *et al.*, 2026). These developments mean that global researcher competence is at the same time intellectual, relational, ethical, technological, and practical. Researchers require sustained opportunities to practice cross-cultural collaboration, receive feedback, reflect on their assumptions, and gain access to international research networks. This observation reinforces the relevance of mentorship as a developmental mechanism through which global competencies can be progressively cultivated rather than simply acquired through isolated international experiences.

From Mentorship to Capacity Building: Identifying the Conceptual Gap

The literature reviewed above reveals a significant conceptual fragmentation. Mentorship scholarship provides substantial insight into how developmental relationships facilitate professional learning, socialization, psychosocial development, and career progression (Ovais & Jain, 2025; Robinson & Huber, 2023; Seotsanyana, 2026). Capacity-building scholarship, in contrast, focuses on how individuals, organizations, and systems develop capabilities that support sustained performance, adaptation, and agency (Caduff *et al.*, 2023). Global competence literature identifies the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and relational capabilities needed to participate effectively across diverse research environments (Hensley, 2025). Though these bodies of scholarship are individually well developed, their intersection remains insufficiently theorized, especially regarding researcher development within Chinese higher education.

The resulting gap regards the developmental pathway connecting mentorship structures and practices to researcher capacities and, ultimately, global researcher outcomes. Existing mentorship models largely explain what mentors provide or what functions mentoring relationships perform; capacity-building perspectives explain the formation and sustainability of capabilities; and global competence frameworks identify the capabilities required for participation in global research ecosystems. What remains unclear is how these elements interact dynamically. In particular, insufficient attention has been given to the mechanisms through which mentorship practices such as modeling, scaffolding, constructive challenge, reflection, and network brokering transform mentoring relationships into sustained cognitive, social, affective, and material capacities

(Babatope, 2025; Iyamuremye *et al.*, 2025; Smith *et al.*, 2025). This gap becomes especially important in China, where hierarchical supervisory traditions, institutional incentives, cultural expectations, and internationalization processes may shape how these mechanisms operate.

This study addresses this gap by conceptualizing mentorship as the developmental mechanism linking mentorship architecture to capacity formation and, ultimately, global researcher outcomes. This proposition represents a shift from viewing mentorship mainly as a relationship, supervisory arrangement, or source of academic assistance toward understanding it as a capacity-building system embedded within institutional and cultural contexts. Accordingly, the proposed MCG Framework integrates mentorship architecture, multidimensional capacity development, and global researcher outcomes while recognizing the mediating importance of trust, productive challenge, reflection, and network brokering and the moderating influence of institutional and cultural conditions. The framework therefore does more than place established concepts alongside one another; it specifies a theoretical pathway through which mentorship can contribute to sustainable global researcher development and generates propositions that can subsequently be examined through empirical research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

Using an integrative conceptual analysis technique, this article employs a conceptual research design to arrive at a framework of the mentorship capacity-building mechanism of global researcher development in China's universities. Conceptual research refers to research that seeks to advance theory rather than collect new empirical data. It does so through the systematic analysis, synthesis, and reinterpretation of existing data (Castillo & Dusard, 2024; Khawaja *et al.*, 2025). The main aim of this method is to formulate new theoretical insights by relating concepts generally studied alone as well as creating explanatory models to respond to new scholarly issues.

The study fills a major gap in the literature where mentorship, capacity building, and global researcher development have been considered in a fragmented way. Each of these domains has been subject to considerable scholarly attention but little effort has been devoted to examining their interconnections within the Chinese higher education context specifically. As a result, the present study formulates a robust conceptual framework that both synthesizes the above-mentioned bodies of knowledge and provides an explanatory model on how mentorship develops globally competent researchers.

Integrative Conceptual Analysis

The study uses integrative conceptual analysis, which is particularly useful in synthesizing diverse theories that would further develop new concepts (Mikhridinova *et al.*, 2024). Unlike traditional literature reviews that just summarize previous findings, we then 'integrate' by trying

to examine relationships between those concepts, identify gaps and develop novel propositions (Swanz *et al.*, 2023). The analysis of this concept was informed by a purposive review of significant and more recent literature related to mentorship, capacity building and global competence. Theoretical works that have been cited multiple times, along with a conceptual contribution of significant value and country-related researcher placement conditions in the community college settings, were chosen. The literature that provides explanatory mileage in development relationships, capabilities formation, academic socialization and participation in world research ecosystem as well as literature were also included. Through purposive selection, the research ensures diverse but complementary theoretical perspectives are included while maintaining relevance to the research purpose (Daniels, 2025; Duarte *et al.*, 2023; Thunqvist *et al.*, 2023). The development of the framework was grounded in three interrelated domains of scholarship.

The first domain of mentorship theory includes the traditional distinction between career-related and psychosocial functions of the mentor (Lee *et al.*, 2025). As well as more recent relational and transformative perspectives that emphasize mutual growth, identity formation, and developmental relationships (Guo & Ghosh, 2026). The second domain, the capacity-building theory, views development as the enhancement of the capability of people, organizations, and systems for sustained performance, adaptability, and long-term viability (Zhong & Zong, 2024). The third domain of literature, global researcher competence, examines knowledge, skills, dispositions, and intercultural capabilities for successful participation in increasingly interlinked international research environments (Berberich & Berberich, 2025; Thin, 2025).

These three bodies of scholarly work were selected to represent different yet complementary dimensions of researcher development. Mentorship theory explains how development occurs through relationships, capacity-building theory explains how capacity is formed, and global competence literature discusses what is needed to be an effective participant in today's global research systems (Pacis & VanWynsberghe, 2020).

Conceptual Synthesis Process

Framework development followed a four-stage conceptual synthesis process adapted from established approaches to theory building and conceptual framework development (Jabareen, 2009; Jaakkola, 2020).

The initial step was identifying the main concepts in the three chosen fields of research. Several concepts emerged from the mentorship literature, including developmental relationships, psychosocial support, role modeling, academic socialization, sponsorship, and network access. The capacity-building scholarship focused on developing capabilities, agency, resilience, sustainability, and adaptive capacity. The literature on global competence referred to intercultural collaboration, epistemic mobility, ethical

reflexivity, digital fluency and knowledge exchange. The subsequent framework development was largely based on the above concepts (Caduff *et al.*, 2023; Nadder, 2018). The second stage involved organizing related concepts into broader analytical categories through iterative comparison and abstraction. Mentorship-related concepts were grouped under the category of mentorship architecture, developmental capabilities were organized into capacity dimensions, and desired researcher characteristics were categorized as global researcher outcomes. This analytical process revealed significant conceptual convergence among the three literature streams, suggesting the potential for an integrated explanatory framework linking mentorship practices to global researcher development (Martinez-Requejo *et al.*, 2024a, 2024b).

The third stage focused on determining theoretical relationships among the concepts and categories identified in the earlier stages. Informed by sociocultural learning theory, mentorship scholarship, and capacity-building frames, mentorship was theorized as the main developmental route for the cultivation and transformation of researcher capacities into global competencies.

The iterative comparison across the three domains of literature revealed various similar development processes. The processes indicate that mentorship does not drive global researcher outcomes directly, but rather through mediating mechanisms that help develop their capabilities. As a result, trust, challenge, reflection, and network brokering were found to be important mechanisms linking mentoring practices with outcomes. Combined, these mechanisms illuminate how mentorship contributes to the epistemic, social, affective and material capacities that underpin global researcher competence (Fernandez, 2025a; Kingiri *et al.*, 2024; Wang & Xun, 2026).

The last step was integrating the identified notions, categories, and linkages into the Mentorship-Capacity-Global (MCG) Framework. The architecture of mentorship, the capacity dimensions, and the global researcher outcomes combine to form a dynamic and contextual model. It also includes moderation context factors relevant to Chinese higher education: institutional resources, disciplinary cultures, international exposure, sociocultural norms of hierarchy, and the supervisory tradition of daoshi (Fernandez, 2025b).

Contextualization within Chinese Higher Education

Keeping the proposed framework culturally and institutionally responsive to Chinese higher education was one of the main objectives of this study. China is particularly important to conceptual development as it is one of the world's fastest-growing research systems and one that does so within distinctive cultural and institutional traditions that shape mentorship practices and researcher development (Cao, 2019; Egea Andrés, 2025; Yuan, 2018).

Thus, data mainly involved a literature review on mentoring from Western sources (particularly the USA

and UK) in disciplines like education, psychology and sociology, which were critically examined through a Chinese lens. The specific aspects involved include hierarchical supervisory relationships, collectivist cultural values, facework in communication, contemporary internationalization policy and visions. An analysis of the scholarly literature on graduate supervision, academic socialization, and researcher development in the wider Chinese university context (Bao *et al.*, 2025; Chen, 2025; Meng *et al.*, 2024; Miranda *et al.*, 2020).

This study doesn't treat Chinese higher education as a space for already established theory to be applied. It takes a contextualized perspective in which mentoring processes and outcomes are shaped by local cultural and institutional conditions. This framework can further contribute to international scholarship on mentoring and to the ongoing discussions in China about researcher development and the higher education landscape more generally.

Ensuring Conceptual Rigor

The study's conceptual rigor was strengthened by four guiding principles. The framework first draws on multiple established theoretical traditions, lessening reliance on any single explanation and increasing theoretical breadth. Next, conceptual integration was guided by principles of theoretical coherence, explanatory relevance, and contextual applicability. The framework was conceptualized explicitly in the cultural and institutional context of Chinese universities, implying that theoretical development was informed by practical realities rather than imaginary or mere predictor conditions. Fourth, we formulated the resulting propositions in ways that will allow for future empirical testing, amendment, and validation (Chien, 2023; Fernandez, 2025c; Hao & Tasir, 2024; Jr. *et al.*, 2026; Pasmala *et al.*, 2025).

In line with the recommendations for high-quality conceptual research, the MCG Framework can be viewed as a theoretically grounded launching point to encourage further research rather than a pre-fabricated model (Corral, 2020; Maney-Hartlaub, 2020). The ideas put forward as part of the framework are conceptual; however, we expect them to be tested empirically in a variety of contexts, institutional, disciplinary and national. This means that researchers involved in mentoring can refine the framework further through qualitative, quantitative or mixed-methods studies on mentoring and researcher development.

Theoretical Foundations

Mentorship Theory

Scholarships focusing on mentorship have long recognized a difference between those functions that are career-related (sponsorship, coaching) and psychosocial ones (e.g., role modeling, emotional support) (Grapin *et al.*, 2023). Future work has broadened this dichotomy with relational mentorship emphasizing mutual growth and interdependence and transformative mentorship

emphasizing identity development and purpose (Koppelberger, 2023).

Nonetheless, much of this analysis is based on Western, individualistic assumptions, often under-theorizing hierarchy, collectivism, and institutional embeddedness. Based on this, an essential adaptation to Chinese higher education contexts is critical (Xue *et al.*, 2025).

Capacity Building Theory

Capacity building refers to the processes through which individuals, organizations, and systems develop the capabilities required for sustained performance and adaptation (Chen & Kawashima, 2025). It is typically conceptualized across three interrelated levels: Individual capacity (skills, knowledge, self-efficacy), Organizational capacity (structures, support systems, cultures), Systemic capacity (policy environments, norms, incentives).

Within higher education, this perspective shifts attention from short-term skill acquisition (“capacity filling”) to long-term developmental trajectories (“capacity building”) (Whitley, 2022).

Global Researcher Competence

Global researcher competence encompasses a multidimensional set of capabilities required to operate effectively across diverse research systems (Yunus *et al.*, 2024). These include epistemic mobility, cross-cultural collaboration, publication and funding literacy, ethical reflexivity, and digital fluency (Suri *et al.*, 2025).

Importantly, global competence extends beyond internationalization; it entails the ability to navigate and integrate multiple epistemological traditions and institutional logics (Yang & Li, 2024).

Mentorship as Capacity Building

This paper conceptualizes mentorship as a primary pedagogical mechanism for capacity building. Through processes such as modeling, scaffolding, co-participation, and network brokering, mentorship facilitates both the acquisition of explicit skills and the internalization of tacit knowledge (Ertsås & Irgens, 2023; Novak & Mulvey, 2021).

This reconceptualization positions mentorship as a dynamic developmental process rather than a static supervisory role.

Context: Chinese Universities and Mentorship

Mentorship in Chinese universities is predominantly structured around the supervisor (daoshi) system, characterized by strong hierarchy and high-performance expectations (Zhao & Zheng, 2025). While effective in transmitting disciplinary knowledge, this model can constrain critical dialogue, limit psychological safety, and restrict independent identity formation (Myers & Buchanan, 2025).

At the same time, Chinese universities are pursuing ambitious global agendas, including international partnerships, joint laboratories, and talent mobility

programs (Xu, 2024). These developments generate tensions between short-term performance metrics and long-term capacity development, as well as between culturally embedded hierarchical norms and the demands of global academic collaboration (González, 2025).

Nevertheless, emerging reforms, particularly those addressing graduate well-being, pedagogical innovation, and internationalization, suggest opportunities for reconfiguring mentorship practices (Carroll, 2023).

The Mentorship-Capacity-Global (MCG Framework Framework Overview

The Mentorship-Capacity-Global (MCG) Framework conceptualizes mentorship as a dynamic, multi-layered system through which researcher development is actively constructed rather than passively transmitted. At its core, the framework integrates three interdependent domains: Mentorship Architecture, Capacity Dimensions, and Global Researcher Outcomes. Rather than functioning in isolation, these domains interact recursively, producing developmental trajectories that unfold over time (Chukwu *et al.*, 2024; Lam, 2023; Velmurugan *et al.*, 2026).

Central to this framework are a set of mediating mechanisms: trust, challenge, reflection, and network brokering, which shape how mentorship relationships translate into capacity development. Trust enables psychological safety, allowing mentees to engage in intellectual risk-taking, while challenge introduces productive tension that stimulates growth (Caduff *et al.*, 2023; Haverly & Brown, 2022). Reflection serves as a critical process through which experiences are internalized and transformed into learning, and network brokering facilitates access to opportunities, resources, and communities beyond the immediate institutional environment (Hess, 2025).

Theory of Change Underpinning the MCG Framework

The Mentorship-Capacity-Global (MCG) Framework is grounded in an implicit theory of change that explains how mentorship functions as a strategic capacity-building intervention for global researcher development. Rather than assuming that mentorship automatically produces developmental outcomes, the framework conceptualizes mentorship as a staged and recursive process through which specific relational and structural inputs activate developmental mechanisms that progressively strengthen researcher capacity over time (Asampong *et al.*, 2023).

At the input level, the framework assumes the presence of enabling mentorship structures, including hierarchical supervision, peer support systems, networked mentorship relationships, and opportunities for interdisciplinary or international engagement. These structural conditions provide emerging researchers with access to academic guidance, observational learning, professional modeling, feedback channels, and institutional resources necessary for developmental progression (Craig, 2018).

At the process level, mentorship is enacted through

a range of developmental practices, including regular scholarly dialogue, collaborative research participation, structured feedback exchanges, research planning, reflective conversations, and psychosocial support. Importantly, these activities extend beyond technical supervision and publication-oriented guidance to include identity formation, professional socialization, and long-term career development (Montgomery & Wilson, 2026). These mentorship processes activate four central developmental mechanisms: trust, challenge, reflection, and network brokering. Trust establishes the psychological safety required for intellectual vulnerability, open communication, and academic risk-taking. Challenge introduces constructive cognitive disequilibrium, encouraging mentees to question assumptions, refine analytical reasoning, and extend their intellectual capabilities. Reflection facilitates the internalization of learning by enabling researchers to critically interpret experiences, integrate feedback, and construct evolving scholarly identities. Network brokering expands access to professional communities, resources, collaborative opportunities, and alternative epistemic perspectives beyond the immediate supervisory environment (Babatope, 2025; Pnevmatikos, 2025).

Through the interaction of these mechanisms, mentorship generates intermediate developmental outcomes in the form of strengthened cognitive, social, affective, and material capacities. Cognitive capacities include critical thinking, research design, and problem framing; social capacities encompass collaboration, communication, and network navigation; affective capacities involve resilience, self-efficacy, and scholarly identity formation; and material capacities include academic writing, grant acquisition, and research management competencies (Husmann, 2023). The theory of change, therefore, positions mentorship not as a linear transfer of expertise from senior scholar to junior researcher, but as an iterative developmental system in which relational quality, institutional structures, and contextual conditions jointly shape the sustainable formation of researchers. In doing so, the MCG Framework makes explicit the causal logic linking mentorship practices to long-term global research capacity (Egea Andrés, 2025; Marsh & Spencer, 2025).

Mentorship Architecture

According to the MCG Framework, mentorship architecture refers to the structural setup and relational patterns through which mentorship thought happens. By using pluralistic and network lenses, the framework moves beyond a dyadic model of mentorship and identifies how multiple forms of relationships contribute to capacity building in different ways (Benitez, 2023).

Hierarchical mentorship is usually taken to refer to the supervisor-student relationship. It plays an important role in the transmission of disciplinary knowledge, modelling of research practices, and academic socialization. Nevertheless, when working in isolation, hierarchical mentorship may perpetuate dependency and impede the

emergence of an independent scholarly identity, especially within highly structured institutional contexts (Chauke, 2025; Pizzolato & Dierickx, 2023).

In addition to this, peer mentorship enables horizontal interactions that develop feedback literacy and collaborations. In the company of your peers, researchers learn to negotiate meaning, critique, and participate in the shared production of knowledge. Regular online exchanges simulate collaborative environments characteristic of global research teams and thus help to develop social and communicative competencies (Alsubaihi, 2024; A. Lee *et al.*, 2024).

Mentorship in a network sense goes beyond the confines of the institution to multiple mentors, potentially across the nation and disciplines. Global researcher development mentorship is crucial because it provides access to diverse perspectives, resources, and opportunities that may not otherwise be available. Network mentorship can also serve as a brokerage mechanism that connects mentees to international research networks and allows them to penetrate global knowledge economies (Gines & Barnes, 2025a; Katy E. Chapman & David E. Beard, 2025).

Ultimately, reverse mentorship encapsulates the two-way process that characterizes today's academic engagement, where junior scholars are involved in developing senior researchers in areas such as digital methods and new forms of research. This type of mentoring cultivates epistemic humility and adaptive thinking, which are ever more important in fast-moving research settings (Barela, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2021).

These types of mentorships show a departure from hierarchical, one-on-one forms of social exchange to distributed, networked configurations. This diversification will be fundamentally necessary to develop the complex and multi-dimensional capacities of researchers.

Capacity Dimensions

The MCG framework sees capacity building as a process that is cognitive, social, affective, and material. Although these dimensions are analytically distinct but strongly connected (DeShazer *et al.*, 2024; Fernández-Vergara, 2025a).

Cognitive capacity refers to the acquisition of high-level intellectual skills like critical thinking, problem framing, and research design.

Mentorship is essential for students to learn these skills through their involvement in disciplinary debates, sharpening their analytical abilities, and developing independent scholarly judgment. Moreover, the cognitive capacity of researchers includes epistemic flexibility, allowing them to draw on and integrate different knowledge systems (Dong *et al.*, 2025; J. Lee & Hooper, 2025; Pachumwon *et al.*, 2025).

Social capacity includes the skills to connect and work together with others in a community. Mentorship allows researchers to build networks, collaborate in research, and deal with interpersonal processes such as conflict and negotiation. According to the author and the year, in the

international context, teamwork and communication are crucial skills for researchers (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2025; Martin *et al.*, 2025).

Affective capacity relates to the emergence of emotional and identity dimensions in research practice. It entails the ability to deal with challenges in learning. Students navigate the process of developing a scholarly identity. It also involves the development of ethical awareness. Mentoring provides support, affirmation, and triggering for reflective engagement, enabling researchers to cope with uncertainty and pressures (Albertyn & Bennett, 2021; Pant & Arlington, 2026).

The material capacity is about acquiring practical skills and resources that make research productive. Academic writing, grant acquisition, and data management are examples (Esia Donkoh, Kusi and Seibu, 2025; Sejuela, & Roa Bagtas, 2025).

Within the MCG Framework, material capacity is seen as one element of a larger process of maturation rather than an objective, which is often stressed in conventional mentorship models (Honigsfeld & Dove, 2025; Rodman, 2023).

Global Researcher Outcomes

The MCG Framework ultimately aims to develop researchers who can operate at an effective level within and across global research systems. This involves four interrelated outcome domains.

Mobility readiness refers to the ability of scientists to transfer successfully into postdoctoral and faculty positions abroad. It includes not only technical expertise but also adapting to new institutional cultures and expectations (Pokimica, 2022).

The ability to engage in global research teams productively captures collaborative competence. The study of human behavior and its impact on the environment and society can help identify solutions to overcome them (Palmu *et al.*, 2025).

Knowledge brokering refers to the capacity to act as a

bridge between different research systems by facilitating the translation of ideas, practices and findings across various cultures and institutions. In the Chinese context, this could mean connecting domestic and global academic communities, enhancing the global circulation of knowledge (Day *et al.*, 2023).

Global citizenship with ethics encourages responsible research conduct in transnational settings. This refers to ethical considerations, power relations, and integrity and inclusivity in global knowledge production (Le, 2024).

Core Propositions

Based on the previous discussion, the MCG Framework proposes five key propositions. Purposeful mentoring that is designed deliberately as a capacity-building process is more likely to produce sustainable global research competencies as it moves from short-term output orientation towards long-term developmental outcomes (Fernández-Vergara, 2025b).

The author opines that networked mentorship configurations are more effective than purely hierarchical models in building global capabilities, as these expose researchers to diverse perspectives and relational dynamics.

Another critical aspect is that developing capacity is mediated by the interaction between psychological safety and productive challenge. Environments that combine support with intellectual challenge are more likely to result in meaningful learning and transformation (Bahena Olivares *et al.*, 2024).

Fourth, global competence is effectively developed via continuous cycles of mentored practice, reflection, and exposure that illustrate the processual and developmental nature of researcher formation (Yeo, 2006).

The effects of mentorship practices in different organizations are indirect. Thus, institutional contexts, such as policies, incentives, and resources, weaken the relationship between mentorship practices and capacity outcomes (Gines & Barnes, 2025b).

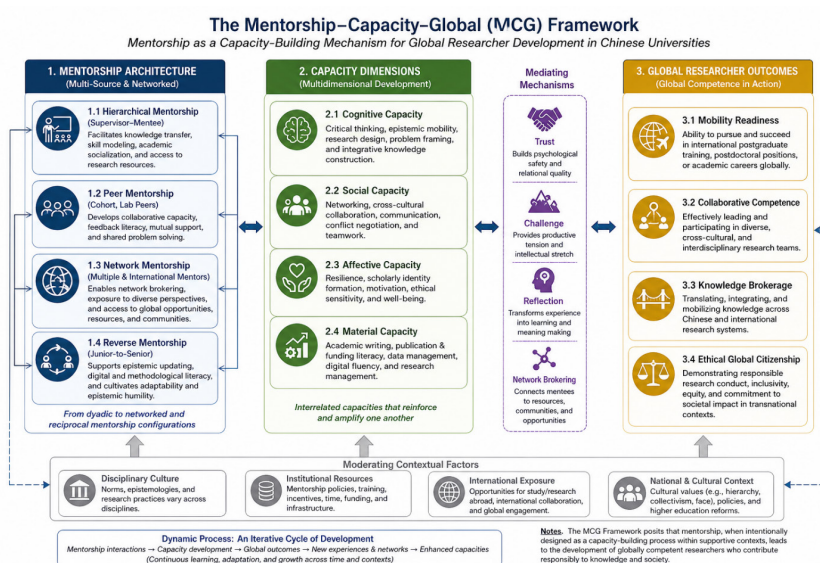


Figure 1: The Mentorship Capacity Global (MCG) Framework diagram.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This paper uses an integrative conceptual analysis rather than primary empirical data collection; the results are conceptual findings that are derived from synthesizing and integrating the three theoretical domains. The analysis produced two comprehensive findings that provide the principal theoretical basis for the MCG Framework: firstly, mentorship must be reconceptualized as an intentional capacity-building process; and secondly, global researcher development involves a diversified and culturally responsive mentorship architecture.

Finding 1: Mentorship Must Move from Guidance to Intentional Capacity Building

The first conceptual finding is that mentorship produces more sustainable researcher development, particularly when it is intentionally designed within capacity building rather than limited to immediate research guidance (Asampong *et al.*, 2023; McIntosh & Antes, 2025). Traditional supervisory relationships frequently focus on research tasks such as literature review, methodology, data collection, manuscript preparation, and publication. These activities are important, but they do not necessarily develop the broader capabilities needed for researchers to navigate increasingly complex global academic environments (Bakokonyane & Pansiri, 2024).

The MCG Framework therefore distinguishes between task-oriented supervision and capacity-oriented mentorship. Task-oriented supervision primarily asks whether the researcher has completed the immediate research requirement. Capacity-oriented mentorship asks what enduring capability the researcher is developing through that activity.

For instance, a supervisor who corrects a doctoral student's manuscript is performing an important supervisory function. However, a capacity-building mentor goes on to explain the reasoning behind the revision, encouraging the student to identify similar weaknesses independently and gradually transferring responsibility for critical evaluation to the student. The immediate output is improved, but the more significant outcome is the development of independent scholarly judgment.

Hence, this distinction establishes the first major theoretical proposition of the MCG Framework: mentorship becomes capacity building when developmental activities are intentionally designed to produce transferable capabilities rather than merely immediate task completion.

The conceptual analysis further indicates that four mechanisms are specifically important in this transformation: trust, challenge, reflection, and network brokering. Trust provides the relational foundation for psychological safety and intellectual risk-taking. Challenge prevents mentoring from becoming passive reassurance by requiring researchers to reconsider assumptions, defend arguments, and engage with alternative perspectives. Reflection enables researchers to convert experience into explicit learning and professional identity

development. Network brokering extends development beyond the immediate mentor by connecting researchers to collaborators, conferences, research communities, funding opportunities, and alternative knowledge systems. These mechanisms operate continuously rather than sequentially. A researcher may receive feedback, reflect upon it, apply the learning in a new research activity, encounter another challenge, and subsequently gain access to a new scholarly network. Mentorship therefore functions as a developmental cycle rather than a one-time intervention.

This finding also elucidates why publication metrics alone provide an incomplete assessment of mentorship quality. Publication output may demonstrate productivity, but it cannot adequately reveal whether researchers have developed independence, collaborative competence, ethical judgment, adaptability, or the capacity to function across research systems. A capacity-oriented evaluation approach should therefore consider developmental evidence alongside conventional research outputs.

Finding 2: Global Researcher Development Requires a Diversified and Culturally Responsive Mentorship Architecture

The second conceptual finding is that no single mentorship relationship is likely to provide all the developmental resources needed for global researcher competence. The analysis therefore supports a transition from a predominantly reciprocal supervisor-student model to a networked mentorship architecture comprising hierarchical, peer, network, and reverse mentoring relationships (Chukwu *et al.*, 2024; Jo *et al.*, 2024).

Hierarchical mentorship remains important because supervisors possess disciplinary expertise, institutional knowledge, research experience, and access to resources. The MCG Framework does not seek to replace this function. Instead, it seeks to prevent hierarchical supervision from becoming the sole source of intellectual and professional development (Ayodele, 2025).

Peer mentorship provides an important complementary space. Doctoral students and early-career researchers can exchange feedback, rehearse presentations, discuss methodological difficulties, and experiment with ideas in environments that would feel less threatening than formal supervisory encounters. Such interactions are prone to strengthen collaborative capacity and feedback literacy while creating opportunities for reciprocal learning (Chandrasekera *et al.*, 2024; Matsuda & Matthew, 2023).

Network mentorship extends the developmental environment beyond the immediate institution. International co-authors, visiting scholars, alumni, professional associations, and interdisciplinary collaborators can expose researchers to alternative research cultures and professional possibilities. Network mentors can also perform a brokering function by connecting emerging researchers to conferences, journals, research projects, funding opportunities, and international research communities (Purcell *et al.*, 2023).

Reverse mentorship introduces an additional dimension. Younger researchers may possess expertise in digital technologies, emerging methodologies, data practices, or contemporary scholarly communication that more senior academics have not fully developed. Creating legitimate opportunities for reciprocal knowledge exchange can therefore cultivate epistemic humility and institutional adaptability (Pizzolato & Dierickx, 2022).

The conceptual analysis suggests that this diversified architecture is especially important within hierarchical academic environments. In the Chinese context, where the daoshi relationship can involve substantial authority asymmetry, alternative mentoring relationships can provide additional channels for dialogue without requiring the formal supervisory relationship to carry every developmental function.

The cultural dimension is equally important. The MCG Framework does not assume that practices developed within Western mentoring environments can simply be transferred to Chinese universities. Cultural expectations concerning hierarchy, respect, face, relational obligations, and communication can shape how feedback is given and received. Consequently, global researcher development requires culturally responsive mentorship rather than culturally neutral mentorship.

For example, constructive criticism can be framed as collaborative scholarly improvement rather than personal evaluation. Supervisors can provide difficult feedback privately while using reflective questions to encourage independent reasoning. Peer writing groups can provide lower-risk environments in which researchers test arguments before presenting them to senior academics. International mentors can expose researchers to alternative communication and feedback norms, thereby helping them develop the ability to navigate different academic cultures.

This finding leads to the second major proposition of the MCG Framework: global researcher development is strengthened when hierarchical mentorship is embedded within diversified, networked, and culturally responsive mentoring environments.

Synthesis of the Findings: The MCG Framework as a Theory of Change

Collectively, the two findings provide the conceptual logic underpinning the MCG Framework. Mentorship architecture represents the structural starting point; developmental practices constitute the activities; trust, challenge, reflection, and network brokering function as mechanisms; cognitive, social, affective, and material capacities represent intermediate developmental outcomes; and mobility readiness, collaborative competence, knowledge brokerage, and ethical global citizenship constitute longer-term global researcher outcomes (Chandler *et al.*, 2026; Schreiber & Cramer, 2024).

The resulting theory of change can therefore be expressed conceptually as:

Diversified Mentorship Architecture → Developmental Mentoring Practices → Trust, Challenge, Reflection and Network Brokering → Multidimensional Researcher Capacity → Global Researcher Outcomes

This sequence should not be interpreted as a rigid linear process. Instead, the MCG Framework conceptualizes researcher development as a progressive and recurrent process in which outcomes can reshape subsequent mentoring relationships, capacities, and opportunities. For example, increased international exposure may strengthen a researcher's confidence and network, which in turn enables more sophisticated engagement with mentors and collaborators (Christian Elledge & Cavell, 2026; Velmurugan *et al.*, 2026).

Institutional and cultural conditions moderate each stage of this process. Resources, disciplinary norms, supervisory workload, institutional incentives, international partnerships, and cultural expectations concerning hierarchy can either facilitate or constrain the translation of mentorship into capacity. This reinforces the framework's central claim that effective mentorship is not simply a matter of individual mentor competence; it is also an institutional and systemic responsibility.

Theoretical Contributions

The MCG Framework contributes to scholarship in several ways. To begin with, it extends the mentorship theory from the West to the context of Chinese higher education literature; thereby helping close the gap in the literature. In addition, it incorporates capacity building in the researcher development discourse, reinterpreting mentorship as a means for enduring capabilities and not just short-term performance. This section combines individual, relational, and systemic perspectives to create a multi-level conceptualization that leads to future empirical propositions.

Practical Implications

The framework has major implications for practice in Chinese universities. It implies a demand for organized mentor training programs that adopt capacity-building approaches including critical thinking, identity support and international involvement strategies. It also stresses the importance of institutionalizing multi-mentor systems in which students are guided by a network of mentors rather than a single supervisor. Additionally, it calls for adopting evaluation metrics that reflect capacity development, such as portfolios or competency measures, rather than relying solely on publication output as an indicator of success.

Applying the MCG Framework in Hierarchical Mentorship Contexts

In Chinese universities, mentorship practices are often embedded within the daoshi system, which is characterized by pronounced authority gradients, role differentiation, and strong expectations of respect toward supervisors (Liu & Zou, 2025; Wong, 2025). While this

system can provide structure, academic discipline, and clear accountability, it may also constrain open communication, critical dialogue, and the development of psychological safety necessary for researcher growth (Latessa *et al.*, 2023). These tensions are particularly salient in the context of global researcher development, where intellectual independence, constructive critique, and collaborative confidence are increasingly valued.

The MCG Framework does not propose the removal of hierarchy, which remains culturally and institutionally embedded within Chinese higher education. Rather, it advocates a recalibration of how hierarchy is enacted within mentorship relationships to better support developmental outcomes. In this sense, the framework seeks to optimize rather than replace existing mentorship structures (Hornak, 2019).

Policy Implications

MCG Framework puts emphasis on aligning the institutional incentives with the capacity-building objective at the policy level. An elaboration of formalized mentorship guidelines articulating developmental goals, plus funding mechanisms for international mentorships virtual and in-person.

Also, it proposes the recognition and reward of excellence in mentoring through academic promotion systems so that faculty members will undertake developmental mentoring activities.

Limitations

The MCG Framework is a conceptual model that is abstract in nature and need to be validated empirically. The applicability with strong likelihood could be within research universities having more resources and opportunities. Furthermore, academic disciplines and regional variations across China may affect the feasibility and effectiveness of the framework, suggesting the need for contextualization.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should attempt to test the relationships proposed in the MCG Framework empirically. Qualitative studies can be conducted to assess how doctoral students in Chinese universities view the relationship between mentorship and capacity development, shedding light on lived experiences. Research assessing whether exposure to networked mentorship would predict global research outcomes, in areas like international mobility and collaboration, could be longitudinal and network based. The use of comparative case studies could help examine the impact of international co-supervision as a capacity development strategy. Trust and challenge could be analyzed using mixed methods as interactive mechanisms within mentoring relationships. Researches, taken together, would provide a strong empirical foundation for further refinement of the framework.

CONCLUSION

China's emergence as a major global research power

has apparently created an increasing need to reconsider not only research outputs but also the development of researchers to participate effectively in interconnected knowledge systems. This conceptual paper has argued that mentorship should be reconceptualized from academic guidance and supervisory support into an intentional process of capacity building. Drawing on mentorship theory, capacity-building scholarship, and global competence literature, the Mentorship-Capacity-Global (MCG) Framework provides a context-sensitive model that links mentorship architecture, multidimensional researcher capacities, and global researcher outcomes through trust, productive challenge, reflection, and network brokering. In consideration of this model, researcher development is understood as a progressive process of practice, dialogue, feedback, reflection, relationship-building, and exposure to diverse research communities, rather than simply the transfer of expertise or the completion of research tasks.

A central contribution of the MCG Framework is its recognition that researcher development is shaped by cultural and institutional contexts. Within Chinese higher education, the daoshi system can provide valuable disciplinary socialization, academic guidance, and access to expertise; however, strong hierarchy and research-output pressures may also constrain critical dialogue, independent decision-making, and psychological safety. The framework therefore does not advocate eliminating hierarchy but recommends complementing hierarchical supervision with peer, network, and reverse mentoring arrangements that create additional opportunities for constructive challenge, reflection, intellectual exchange, and international engagement. At the institutional and policy levels, this requires structured mentor-development programs, multi-mentor arrangements, international mentoring opportunities, workload recognition, peer-learning structures, and evaluation systems that consider researcher independence, collaboration, ethical awareness, international engagement, and professional networking alongside publications and grants.

As an integrative conceptual analysis, the MCG Framework remains theoretically grounded and requires empirical validation across different institutional, disciplinary, and cultural settings. Future research should examine how different mentorship architectures influence researcher capacity and global research outcomes through qualitative, longitudinal, social-network, as well as mixed-methods approaches. Finally, the paper reframes mentorship as more than a supportive or interpersonal practice: it is strategic infrastructure for sustainable research capacity. It is quite imperative to note that Global researchers are not developed through publication pressure alone; they emerge from intentional, relational, culturally responsive, and developmentally oriented mentoring systems capable of cultivating the intellectual independence, collaborative competence, resilience, ethical responsibility, and cross-cultural adaptability needed to advance and transform knowledge across borders.

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